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ABSTRACT

Educational Service Unit (ESU) 18 is an independently funded agency providing evaluation services for the Lincoln (Nebraska) Public Schools. ESU employees provide direct services on a regular basis to the school district. A close working relationship exists between members of the ESU and district staffs. Consequently, as the occasion requires, the ESU evaluator can provide the responsiveness characteristic of internal evaluation while maintaining the credibility of an external evaluator. After a brief discussion of the organization of ESU 18, this paper describes the Evaluation Team's role in a multi-year study of a school district's reading program. Throughout the development and implementation of the revised reading program ESU evaluators have supported district efforts by conducting a series of evaluation studies. This multi-year cooperative effort is a good example of the responsiveness, timeliness, and accessibility fostered by the ESU structure for providing services to the schools. (Author/GK)

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THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS: MAINTAINING CREDIBILITY AND RESPONSIVENESS IN EVALUATION

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October 2, 1981

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THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS: MAINTAINING CREDIBILITY AND RESPONSIVENESS IN EVALUATION

The purpose of this paper is to describe how the semi-autonomous nature of the Educational Service Unit (ESU) provides an organizational structure which maximizes both credibility and responsiveness in evaluation. First, the paper outlines the history and organization of ESU 18. Secondly, the paper discusses how the organization of the ESU contributes to achieving a balance of credibility and responsiveness in evaluation. Finally, an example of a multi-year study illustrates the responsiveness which is possible through an ESU structure.

HISTORY AND ORGANIZATION OF ESU 18

Educational Service Unit 18 is one of 19 regional educational service agencies in the state of Nebraska. The 19 ESUs were created by the Nebraska legislature in 1965 with the purpose of providing educational services on a multi-county basis to the nearly 1,000 school districts in the state. ESUs provide a diversity of services from giving computer support to providing media and special education services.

ESU 18 is one of two single distict ESUs in the state and is the only ESU to provide evaluation services. An Evaluation Team at ESU 18 was formed in 1973. The boundaries of ESU 18 coincide with the boundaries of the Lincoln Public Schools, which has 1,300 teachers and 25,000 students. ESU 18 shares the same Board of Education as LPS.

ESUs in Nebraska are funded by a tax levy on local property and by revenues from contract services. ESUs are limited by law to a maximum tax levy of one mill. This taxing authority is separate from that of the local school districts. ESU 18 is curently taxing at a rate of around one-fourth mill. In addition, funds are received for contract services.

The ESU 18 Evaluation Team consists of four full-time, PhD level evaluation specialists and two support staff. Providing evaluation services is the primary function of ESU 18. Although ESU 18 was authorized in 1978 to provide evaluation services to external agencies, primary focus has remained upon serving the Lincoln Public Schools. With this priority, contracts with external agencies have been purposely cut back from 9 percent of professional time in 1978-79 to less than 1 percent in 1980-81. Professional time spent on federal projects has declined from essentially 100 percent when ESU 18 began to a current level of about 35 percent.

The authors wish to express appreciation to Carl D. Novak for providing information on the history and organization of ESU 18 and for critiquing this paper.

CREDIBILITY VERSUS RESPONSIVENESS

Credibility in evaluation is often characterized as involving objectivity and freedom from bias. Responsive evaluations are characterized by sensitivity to a client's concerns and attentiveness to the nuances of the project. Evaluations by an external agency are generally considered as being more credible, in part because of the evaluator's status as a disinterested third party. Evaluations by an internal unit are often viewed as being more responsive. Credibility and responsiveness in evaluations are often portrayed as being dichotomous; that is, emphasizing one must be at the expense of the other. However, the structure of the ESU allows maximizing both credibility and responsiveness.

ESU Evaluations as Credible

Several factors help to maintain the credibility of ESU evaluations. These are outlined below.

1. Secure and Independent Funding Source. A common problem of evaluations with externally contracted agencies is that if the agency reports negative results they may never receive another contract. Though they are "external" they can be much influenced by funding considerations. The ESU has a secure funding source which provides for its continuance irrespective of evaluation results.

2. Mandate of a Single Purpose. ESU 18 has the single mission of providing evaluation services. Its single goal is the general improvement of public education. As a result, the ESU has no hidden conflict-of-interest problems.

3. Separate Line of Authority (except at higher echelons). The line of authority for the ESU converges with that of the Lincoln Public Schools only at the higher echelons. This separate line of authority fosters a spirit of independence for ESU evaluations. The typical working relationship is the consultation model of the external agency.

4. Internal Editorial Review. Although as a matter of courtesy evaluation reports are usually shared with project personnel before being published, the ESU Evaluation Team retains the sole responsibility of editorial review of its reports.

5. Team Evaluations and Contract Services. Most ESU evaluations are assigned to and carried out by individual team members with other team members serving as consultants, as needed. If there exists a concern about maintaining the credibility of an ESU evaluation to an external audience, an evaluation can be undertaken as a team effort. Likewise, the ESU can contract with external agencies for portions or all of an evaluation.

6. Organization of Evaluation Projects. As it turns out, most ESU evaluations in which the issue of credibility may be of concern are the projects in which the credibility of the ESU Evaluation Team is strongest. For local evaluations the emphasis is often on responsiveness more than on credibility. These are the projects in which Evaluation Team members have closer working relationships with LPS personnel and can interact responsively. The evaluations which require high credibility are usually the ones in which team members are "most distant", most objective, and least subject to charges of bias.

7. Politically Knowledgeable. Evaluation Team members are sensitive to the political dynamics within the district and are better able to avert attempts to bias results than would be an external evaluator who is unfamiliar with the situation.

8. Long-Term Stability of ESU 18. Evaluation Team members will continue to be around long after an individual evaluation is completed. This makes it more difficult for others to "file and forget" an unpopular report. Evaluation Team members can provide follow-up to see that results are used.

ESU Evaluations as Responsive

1. Closely Associated Goals and Funding. Although funding for ESU 18 is separate from the Lincoln Public Schools, LPS and ESU 18 share a common funding source (the taxpayer) and a common goal (excellence in public education). This helps in maintaining close ties between the two.

2. Joint Housing. ESU 18 is housed in the Public School's Administration Building. This close proximity is especially convenient when working jointly on projects with LPS personnel.

3. Organizational Stability of ESU 18. Because LPS personnel know that the ESU services will continue to be available on a request basis, evaluation services are more easily and readily available than would be the case with an external agency. Also, if continued support or services are needed after an evaluation is completed, the Evaluation Team is around to provide them.

4. Established History of Cooperation. Based upon a past history of successful projects, LPS personnel and Evaluation Team members know what to expect from one another. Start-up time for projects is, therefore, minimal.

5. Leadership the Same at Highest Levels. ESU 18 has the same Board of Education as LPS. In addition, the ESU's administrative officer has a joint role with the school district. This joint leadership leads to a natural close relationship between ESU 18 and Lincoln Public Schools.

6. Familiarity with LPS Personnel and "Personality." Evaluation Team members are familiar with LPS schools, personnel, policy, and "personality." This helps the Team be more efficient in providing evaluation services. By knowing the "right places" to look, Evaluation Team members, from time to time, uncover results that would be missed by an external evaluator.

7. Political Viability. ESU 18 fulfills a service role toward the public schools rather than carrying out an auditing or accountability function. As a result, LPS personnel can trust ESU 18 to maintain confidentiality in especially sensitive areas. In some cases evaluations are undertaken which otherwise might not be.

Credibility and Responsiveness in Perspective

It is common to view credibility and responsiveness in evaluation as requiring trade-offs. Though this has not been explored in the present paper, on occasion this will be true also for ESU evaluations. However, the authors contend that the ESU organization and structure enable ESU 18 evaluations in most cases to be both credible and responsive. The remainder of this paper discusses an instance of a multi-year study in which the responsiveness of ESU evaluations is exemplified.

A MULTI-YEAR STUDY OF A DISTRICT READING PROGRAM

In accordance with a general model for subject area studies in Lincoln Public Schools the district Reading Consultant organized a Study Committee for the purpose of reviewing the current reading program, identifying and studying critical issues relevant to the program, and making recommendations for changes in the existing program. The ESU Evaluation Team has supported the district's efforts to improve the reading program by conducting a series of evaluation studies corresponding to phases in the development and implementation of the revised reading program. Three evaluation studies, described below, have been completed to date.

Evaluation Study I

The Evaluation Team's work on the reading study during 1978 may be characterized as a context evaluation. The Reading Consultant and the Study Committee were involved in planning changes in the district's reading program. The evaluation focused on describing the existing program as it was implemented. Critical issues were identified

regarding (1) the philosophy upon which the program was based and (2) the extent to which the philosophy was being implemented.

An instrument, developed to describe the reading program, was administered to a random sample of 269 elementary school personnel. For each statement on the instrument respondents first indicated whether the statement should be characteristic of the district reading program. Responses to the "should be" scale were used to identify philosophy issues. Second, respondents indicated whether the statement is descriptive of the reading program. Information from the "is descriptive" scale was used to identify implementation issues.

Philosophy issues were defined as statements about which there was lack of concensus or with which a number of participants disagreed. Nine of the 80 statements were initially identified by the evaluators as philosophy issues. Specific recommendations were made to the Reading Consultant and the Study Committee for resolving the philosophy issues.

Implementation issues were identified when respondents indicated that a statement of philosophy regarding the reading program is not descriptive of reading instruction in their schools. Although 15 statements were identified by the evaluators as implementation issues, it was recommended that specific analysis of these issues be delayed until the philosophy issues were resolved.

Early Program Development

Following review of the existing program the Reading Study Committee and the consultant wrote goal statements defining the district's position (philosophy) regarding reading. A set of common principles that guide reading instruction for all students was adopted. A comprehensive effort to develop a new reading curriculum began. District Reading Objectives applicable to all students were adopted. Specific teaching, testing and data collection procedures were selected for possible inclusion in the reading curriculum.

Evaluation Study 2

The second evaluation study may be described as an input evaluation. It was conducted to test the feasibility of incorporating in the new Reading Program three procedures for collecting data on students' performance on District Reading Objectives. Twenty-four teachers in five schools participated in a field test of the data collection procedures.

Evaluation methodology included the use of personal interviews and a rating scale. During the first semester of the 1979-80 school year all teachers participating in the field study were interviewed regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using the procedures they had implemented to collect information about students' performance in reading. Based on the teachers' responses to interview questions, a rating scale was developed to measure teachers' opinions about procedures they had used in the field test.

One general finding of the evaluation study was that participating teachers thought the recommended procedures for collecting data on student performance in reading were useful. However, they identified some specific problems in implementing each of the three procedures. On the basis of identified problems, modifications were made in the procedures.

Later Program Development

The Reading Consultant and the Study Committee continued work on program development during the year (1979-80) that the field study was conducted. Several major tasks were accomplished. After completing a comprehensive review of instructional materials available, the Study Committee selected a new basal reading series to be recommended for adoption by the district. District Progress Tests are criterion-referenced instruments designed to measure student achievement in skills specified in the District Reading Objectives. A student's progress in accomplishing the objectives are recorded on the Individual Reading Record.

During the 1980-81 school year, 50 teachers in 13 elementary schools participated in a pilot of the new Reading Program. The teachers used instructional materials from a new basal reading series in addition to locally-developed District Progress Tests and the Individual Reading Record.

Evaluation Study 3

The evaluator's work during the pilot year may be described as a process evaluation. It provided information on strengths and weaknesses of the new Reading Program. Emphasis was placed on finding solutions to identified problems.

During December 1980, pilot teachers responded to questions relevant to program implementation and teachers' attitudes toward the program. Results of the first questionnaire indicated that teachers were able to successfully implement the new Reading Program and held favorable attitudes toward the program. However, teachers did identify some specific weaknesses that needed to be addressed.

A second questionnaire was sent to pilot teachers in April 1981. Proposed remedial measures for dealing with identified weaknesses were listed. Teachers were asked to judge the usefulness of the proposed measures. In addition, teachers responded to questions relevant to the new basal reading series, the District Progress Tests and the Individual Reading Records.

In general, pilot teachers approved of the use of District Reading Objectives, progress testing, and Individual Reading Records. They perceived of the new basal reading series as being more beneficial than the series currently used in the district. More than 90 percent of the pilot teachers recommended district-wide implementation of the new Reading Program.

During the summer of 1981 the ESU Evaluation Team provided a supplementary service by conducting item analyses of District Progress Tests. Information derived from the item analyses were used during revision of the tests.

Future Evaluation

During the 1981-82 school year, the new Reading Program is being implemented in all district elementary schools. Among other efforts, an impact evaluation will be conducted to determine the effects of the new Reading Program. First, the evaluation will investigate the extent of implementation of the program district-wide. An attempt will be made to assess the variability in implemenation with particular emphasis upon wide divergencies. Beyond this, the evaluation will focus upon impacts of the Reading Program as reflected in student affect and reading achievement. Finally, item analyses will again be conducted on the District Progress tests. Further revisions will be made in the District Progress tests as needed.

SUMMARY

The Educational Service Unit described in this paper has a secure funding source that is separate from the public school system it serves. Organizationally, there is a separate line of authority except at the highest levels. Because of the semi-autonomous nature of the ESU, a balance between credibility and responsiveness in evaluation has been achieved and maintained.

ESU evaluators and school district personnel work together cooperatively to achieve common goals. Because of this ongoing working relationship, evaluators can be particularly responsive to the needs of program staff.

The responsiveness characteristic of ESU evaluations is exemplified by a multi-year study of the district's reading program. To support the work of the Reading Consultant and a Reading Study Committee, the ESU Evaluation Team has conducted context, input, and process evaluations. During the present school year, an impact evaluation will also be conducted. Emphasis will continue to be placed on flexibility in responding to the emerging needs of staff responsible for program development and implementation.